

Introduction

The *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* (小倉百人一首) is one of the most important collections of poetry in Japan. It is a snapshot of Japan in the middle ages, from the perspective of the highly select group of men and women that occupied its most elite ranks.

Each of the hundred poems was composed by a different poet, sometime during the Heian period (794-1185) or the Kamakura period (1185-1333). The form of the poems is called Tanka (短歌), or Waka (和歌). It is a similar, but longer and older form of poetry to Haiku (俳句), which is also native to Japan. Each poem consists of five parts, each defined by a specific number of morae, or Japanese syllables.

Tanka can be thought of as poetic photographs. The aim is to capture a snapshot of a scene in a single moment of time. Thus, while Tanka may describe phenomena which may have taken a long time to come about, each poem zooms in on what can be seen at a single glance, often coupled with the viewer's emotional reaction or compared with some aspect of the poet's life.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* in Japanese society over the centuries. Along with the *万葉集* (*manyōshū*), it is one of the pre-eminent collections of classical poetry, known for its range of subjects and structures. In the early twentieth century it even became part of a game, traditionally played to celebrate the new year, known as *Uta-garuta* (歌ガルト). In this game, there are two sets of 100 cards. The first set has each of the poems in full, along with their respective poets' names. The second set has only the closing phrase of the poems. In the game, one player reads randomly from the closing phrase deck, and the aim of the remaining players is to find the corresponding card from the other deck.

This poetry collection was originally created by Fujiwara no Teika (1162-1241), who also contributed poem number 97. Fujiwara's patron was the retired emperor Go-toba, who contributed poem number 99 to this collection. From 1180 until 1235, Fujiwara kept a journal known as the *Meigetsuki* (明月記), or the record of the clear moon. Here, in 1235, Fujiwara records:

嗟峨中院ノ障子ノ色紙形、故予ニ書ク可キ由。彼ノ入道懇切。極メテ見苦シキ事ト雖モ愁ニ筆ヲ染メテ之ヲ送ル。古来ノ人ノ歌、各一首、天智天皇自以来家隆・雅経ニ及ブ。

I was asked to write the Shōji screens at Saga palace, to celebrate his [Utsunomiya Yoritsuna's] honourable entering the priesthood. Notwithstanding that this was an extremely shameful thing, I quickly put brush to paper and sent these poems from ancient and recent poets, one poem each, beginning with Emperor Tenji, collected into one elegant text.

Fujiwara's son, Fujiwara no Tamaie (藤原為家) (1198-1275) had made the request on behalf of his friend and father-in-law, Utsunomiya Yoritsuna (宇都宮頼綱). The collection was to adorn screens that would decorate Yoritsuna's residence on Mount Ogura, in the Saga district of Kyoto. This location, and the structure of the collection has given it its traditional name; which could be translated literally as "the hundred people, one poem [each] of Ogura".

The screens themselves no longer exist. Therefore, the calligraphy used here is taken from the book form of the collection published in 1680, when mass production of printed matter was first starting to develop as an industry in Japan. This book is an early example of Ukiyo-e woodblock printing, and the artist, Hishikawa Moronobu (菱川師宣), is remembered as one of the most important figures in the popularisation of this medium.

The process for producing the calligraphy in this medium would have consisted of the calligrapher writing onto thin paper, which was then pasted in reverse onto a wooden plate. The plate would then be carved such that only the text was left in relief. After any remnants of the paper had been cleaned away, the plate could be covered in ink and used to produce multiple prints. This same simple principle was gradually refined and developed in Japan, such that highly complex polychrome images could be produced. Ultimately the same artform came to be used in some of Japan's most iconic and globally recognisable art works, such as Katsushika Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, and *Red Fuji* both of which were probably first published in the 1830s.

The Poets and Places of the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu

It cannot be overstated how elite the group of poems represented by this collection were in their own time. During the Heian period (794–1185), when most of these poets lived, the population of Japan was around two million people strong. But the ruling elite made up only a tiny fraction of that number, amounting to only a few hundred people, who were generally found in and around the capital city of Heian-kyō (平安京), modern-day Kyoto. Indeed, there is evidence that having to leave the capital was seen as a real punishment in itself for the elite, and the further they were expected to go, the more severe the punishment. This is borne out by the repeated mention of Ōsaka gate, which was a tollgate, located between present-day Kyoto and Shiga prefectures. It is the gate which continues to give the Kansai (関西) [west of the gate] and Kantō (関東) [east of the gate] regions their names today. In this collection, it appears to symbolise one of the barriers between the known, civilised capital, and the unknown, outside world.

Thus, the vast majority of the locations mentioned by name in the poems are to be found in the region which later came to be known colloquially as Kamigata (上方), Kansai, Kinai (畿内), or Kinki (近畿), which encompasses the old capital of Nara, as well as the present-day cities of Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe, all within reach of the Heian-period capital.

Below are the locations mentioned in the poems, together with their present-day locations. Places referred to euphemistically in the poems are given their actual names in brackets:

	Place name	Prefecture	Poem
	陸奥 Michinoku	The northern pacific coast of Honshū	14
	稲羽山 Inaba-yama	鳥取県 Tottori	16
	筑波 Tsukuba	茨城県 Ibaraki	13
	伊吹 Ibuki	岐阜県 Gifu	51
	末の松山 Su(w)e no Matsu-yama	宮城県 Miyagi	42
	雄島 O-shima	宮城県 Miyagi	90
	ならの小川 Nara no Kogawa (御手洗川) (Mitarashi-gawa)	京都 Kyōto	98
	生野 Ikuno	京都 Kyōto	60
	丹後 Tango	京都 Kyōto	60
	天橋立 Amanohashidate	京都 Kyōto	60
	逢坂 Ōsaka (not to be confused with the present-day city)	京都府 Kyōto, 滋賀県 Shiga	10, 25
	宇治 Uji	京都府 Kyōto	8, 64
	手向 Tamuke	京都府 Kyōto	24

小倉山 Ogura-yama	京都府 Kyōto	26
大江山 Ōe-yama	京都府 Kyōto	60
瓶原 Mika no Hara	京都府 Kyōto	27
由良 Yura	京都府 Kyōto	46
杣山 Soma-yama (比叡山) (Hiei-zan)	滋賀県 Shiga	95
田子 Tago	静岡県 Shizuoka	4
富士 Fuji	静岡県 Shizuoka 山梨県 Yamanashi	4
住之江 Sumi no E	大阪府 Ōsaka	18
難波 Naniwa	大阪府 Ōsaka	19, 20, 88
三笠 Mikasa	奈良県 Nara	7
春日 Kagusa	奈良県 Nara	7
竜田 Tatsuta	奈良県 Nara	17, 69
吉野 Yoshino	奈良県 Nara	31, 74
香具山 Kagu-yama	奈良県 Nara	2
三室 Mimoro	奈良県 Nara	69
初瀬 Hatsuseno	奈良県 Nara	74
奈良 Nara	奈良県 Nara	61
高砂 Takasago	兵庫県 Hyōgo	34
松帆浦 Matsuo-ura	兵庫県 Hyōgo	97
淡路島 Awaji-shima	兵庫県 Hyōgo	78
有馬山 Arima-yama	兵庫県 Hyōgo	58

Though many are not widely known outside Japan, these place names are not used in the poems randomly. Each is carefully chosen for the image it evokes in the mind of the Japanese reader, and in some cases, the poem is difficult to understand without any knowledge of these places and the poets.

Perhaps the best example is poem 60, around half of which is made up of place names. This poem was written by Shikibu the Younger (personal name lost), the daughter of famous female poet, Izumi Shikibu (和泉式部), author of poem 56. Izumi divorced her first husband soon after the birth of her daughter in 997. She subsequently remarried, this time to Fujiwara no Yasumasa (藤原保昌), governor of Tango Province (丹後) on the coast to the north of Kyoto, which is one of the places mentioned in the poem. In order to go from the capital to visit her mother at Ōe mountain or Amanohashidate, the famous pine-covered sandbar, both in Tango, it would have been necessary to travel on the road through Ikuno village, which she notes, is a long way. Indeed, bearing in mind that a noblewoman in the Heian period would have travelled in a palanquin, the journey would have taken several days. Thus, this poem's whole strategy is to invoke place names that

are evocative to the audience, but that they have not necessarily personally visited because they are remote from the capital.

It should be borne in mind that the territory controlled by the Japanese empire during the Heian period was not as large as present-day Japan. Instead, it extended to the east only a little further than the location of present-day Tokyo, to the north around the area of Nagano, and to the south around the area of Nagasaki on Kyushu island. The rest of the land was controlled by what the Japanese derisively termed the Ezo (蝦夷), or “shrimp barbarians”, who are thought to be the ancestors of the present-day Ainu people.

At this time, the politics of the Japanese Empire was oligarchical. Over many generations, the Fujiwara (藤原) clan had married into the imperial family and gradually taken control of most positions of power. Indeed, no fewer than 28 of the poems in this collection were written by members of the Fujiwara clan. In other respects, too, the elite status of the poets is borne out in the ways that the name of each poet is represented in Japanese. There is little consistency in these names, but most include one or all of a combination of: uckoo a clan affiliation, a personal name, and an indication of rank, in that order.

The general practice in translating the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu appears to be simply to transliterate both the name and rank. However, because the ranks themselves are generally archaic, even readers with a knowledge of Japanese are unlikely to understand the significance of most, and readers with no knowledge of Japanese could be forgiven for assuming that the whole passage is the poet’s name. In addition, by transliterating the title, nothing of the status of the poets, which was a factor specifically noted in the Japanese texts, is conveyed. It is also generally not possible for a reader to discern who of the poets is male, and who female.

In order to give the contemporary reader a flavour for the poets’ various statuses, in this book, the poets’ names and their ranks have been separated. The names have been transliterated as normal, but the ranks have been translated. Presented this way, it is possible to notice cultural features of Heian society which could otherwise be missed. For instance, it is easy to see that most of the 21 female poets are not given personal names in their own rights. Instead, they are referred to indirectly in terms of their relationship to someone else, the outstanding examples being poets 53 and 54, who are only recorded as the mothers of their sons. Even the famous Murasaki Shikibu, author of the *Tale of Genji* is only known indirectly, “Murasaki” being the name of a main character in the *Tale of Genji*, and “Shikibu” referring to the 式部省 (Shikibu-shō), or ministry of ceremonials, where her father held office.

As in the case of Murasaki Shikibu, sometimes the actual names of these poets have been lost to history. However, in the cases where the poets' personal names are known but not recorded by the source text, this book includes the name in square brackets.

Below are the translations used for the various Japanese official titles that appear in the collection:

天皇	Tennō	Emperor/Empress
院	In	
皇太后	Kōtaigō	Empress Dowager
親王	Shinnō	Prince
朝臣	Ason	Courtier
左大臣	Sadaijin	Minister of the Left
右大臣	Udaijin	Minister of the Right
中納言	Chūnagon	Middle Councillor
權中納言	Gonchūnagon	Acting Middle Councillor
參議	Sangi	Associate Councillor
前大僧正	Saki no Daisōjō	Former High Priest
大僧正	Daisōjō	High Priest
法師	Hōshi	Buddhist Master

Plants, Animals and Culture

A large number of the poems concern themselves purely with personal relationships, and many achieve this by making reference to one or more plant species. Many of these plants are, to some extent, specific to Japan or East Asia, and have specific cultural meanings for the people there that are not easily conveyed in a poetic translation. Therefore, this table presents a list of the plants mentioned in the poems, together with a description that can give extra depth to the poems.

Japanese	Notes	Poem
あしびき ashibiki	Lily of the valley	3
さしも草 sashimogusa させも sasemo	Japanese mugwort. An evergreen herb found across east Asia and used widely in cooking and traditional medicine.	51, 75
さねかづら sanekazura	The Kadsura Japonica vine. It is an evergreen vine with variegated leaves, which bears edible fruit.	25
松 matsu	Pine tree. Is used to great effect as a homophone in Japanese with the word待つ (matsu) [to wait].	16, 34
桜 sakura	Cherry blossom. It should be noted that in poem number 61, the blossoms are named as 八重桜 (yaezakura), or double-flowered cherry blossom. The expression in Japanese literally means “eight layered cherry blossoms”, and the poet uses this expression to great effect in this poem by comparing the blossom to the inner sanctum of the old imperial court, which was known as the “九重” (kokonoe), literally, the nine layers.	61, 66, 73
榎 maki	This evergreen tree is a member of the conifer order, and while not actually part of the pine family, its common names in English are yew plum pine, Buddhist pine and fern pine. In contemporary Japanese, the tree is known as <i>Kusamaki</i> or <i>inumaki</i> . Its taxonomic name is <i>Podocarpus macrophyllus</i>	87
浅茅 asaji	Sparsely growing cogon grass. As in this poem, this term often appears in Japanese literature to evoke a bleak landscape.	39
白菊 shiragiku	White chrysanthemum	29
稲 ina	The rice plant.	71
笹 sasa	Bamboo grass. These types of bamboo are not the tall, tree-like species that the word “bamboo” normally evokes, but smaller, low-grown species, with multiple thin stems.	58
紅葉 momiji	Japanese maple. The characters used individually mean “crimson” and “leaves”, and the tree is normally invoked in connection to autumn, which the leaves do indeed turn many shades of red, orange and yellow. In the same way that cherry blossom has come to be synonymous with spring in Japanese culture, the red Japanese maple leaves have come to be synonymous with autumn. Thus, in poem number 17, the Japanese poet does not need to state that it is the leaves that have died the river red, as this is implied by the colour and the renown of the Tatsuta river bank for its maple leaves.	(17) 24, 26, 32, 69
芦 ashi	Common reeds. It seems that there was a profusion of reeds growing in Naniwa (present-day Osaka) when the poems were composed.	19, 71, 88
花 hana	Literally means “flower”, but is used poetically in Japanese, even today, to mean cherry blossom. There is one exception in this collection, which is poem number 35, where the flowers are not cherry blossoms, but plum blossoms. This can be deduced from the relatively early period when the author lived (868?-945), which is before cherry blossom became pre-eminent. During this early period, the Japanese followed the Chinese tradition of making plum blossom the star.	9, 33, 35, 96
若菜 wakana	Literally “young vegetables”. This means the edible fresh young greens that come up early in springtime.	15

葎 Vines. The poem is not specific about the kind of vines it means, but it does 47
mogura specifically state that they are八重 (yae), or multi-layered.

As with plants, many animals and birds are mentioned in the poems, often as a way to evoke a particular season, but in some cases, to evoke specific stories that were clearly well known to the original Japanese audience of the poems, but are not necessarily known at all to present-day English-speaking readers. This table lists all of the animals and birds mentioned, and gives notes on their cultural importance for the poems.

Japanese	Notes	Poem
かささぎ kasasagi	Magpie. A highly intelligent, black and white member of the crow family. The reference here appears to be to the story behind the Tanabata (七夕) festival, which was inherited from Chinese folklore. In the story, on the seventh night of the seventh month, magpies form a bridge with their wings that allow Orihime (織姫) to meet her love, Hikoboshi (彦星), who lives on the other side of the milkyway. In Japanese, the milkyway is called 天の川 (ama no gawa) [the river of the sky]	6
きりぎりす kirigirisu	The Japanese cricket. As in China, crickets were kept in Japan as pets for hundreds of years. They are associated with summertime heat, as this is when their song is most likely to be encountered.	91
ほととぎす hototogisu	The lesser cuckoo (<i>Cuculus poliocephalus</i>), noted for its song, which is very different from that of the common cuckoo (<i>Cuculus canorus</i>)	81
千鳥 chidori	Plovers are wading birds. There are around 60 species of plover around the world, but in this context, the most likely candidate appears to be the long-billed plover (<i>Charadrius placidus</i>), which is around 20cm long with a white breast and grey wings.	78
鳥 tori	Literally a bird, but in this case a cockerel. The story invoked in this poem is a classical Chinese one, in which an army led by Lord Mengchang was fleeing King Zhaoxiang of Qin. They were stopped at the Hangu Pass, the last checkpoint before they left Qin territory. There, they found the gates closed until dawn, which was counted as when the cock crowed. One of the fleeing soldiers mimicked a cock-crow, causing the real cockerels to start crowing too. Hence, the gates were opened, and the army and Lord Mengchang were able to pass through to safety.	62
鹿 shika	Deer. In the context, it probably means a Sika deer, the relatively small species that inhabits much of East Asia. In the poems, it is often invoked for its autumn cry, which is very different from the roar of the Eurasian Red Deer stag. It is a haunting whistle or high-pitched screech.	5, 83

As could be expected of cultures separated by such large amounts of space and time, the poems make mention of several objects and cultural practices that could not be fully conveyed in the translations, and would not necessarily be readily understood by a present-day English-speaking reader. The following table gives some background to these cultural artefacts.

Japanese	Notes	Poem
白妙 Shirotae	The word Shirotae has come to mean simply “white cloth” in Japanese. But originally, it meant a specific kind of cloth made from the bark of the mulberry tree. This cloth is pure white for this reason.	2, 4
網代木 Ajirogi	A kind of trap used to catch small fish during wintertime. It consisted of stakes, driven into the riverbed in the shallows, to which a kasu (簀) was attached. A kasu is a mat of thin woven bamboo or tree branches.	64

袖 sode	<p>The poems have many mentions of sode, or sleeves, demonstrating how culturally important they were. Here, the word refers to the long, hanging sleeves of a traditional kimono. They have two main connotations in the poems, both of which have negative nuances.</p> <p>The first is the idea of片敷き (katajiki). Sleeves are mentioned explicitly in this respect in poem 42, and implicitly in 91. During the Heian period, lovers would use the sleeves of one another's kimono as pillows. Katajiki means that one has to use one's own kimono for this purpose, because one is sleeping alone.</p> <p>The second is the idea of wringing one's sleeves. This appears in poems 65, 72, 90 and 92. It is a reference to the idea that people during this period would use their sleeves to wipe away their tears. Thus, here, the poets are expressing their overwhelming grief by stating how wet their sleeves have become. Poem number 90 takes this idea to the extreme by talking about tears of blood. This is a reference to a classical Chinese story by Han Feizi, in which a farmer displeased a king and had his feet cut off as a punishment. He is described as crying so bitterly that his tears dried up and turned to blood.</p> <p>Poem 95 uses the sleeve metaphor in a different way, to indicate the robes of a Japanese Buddhist monk.</p>	42, 65, 72, 90, 92, 95
藻塩 moshio	Seaweed salt. This is an ancient method of producing salt. It consists of collecting seaweed and covering it with seawater. Then boiling off the water and finally refining the residue.	97
有明 ariake	Several of the poems mention the waning moon of the second half of the lunar cycle, which occurs from the 16th night, on. During this part of the cycle, the moon is visible until dawn and the poets are generally using it as a way to say that they have spent a sleepless night.	21, 30, 31, 81